ON THE CONTEXT AND DEVELOPMENT OF AUGUSTINE’S EARLY COMMENTARIES ON THE PAULINE LETTERS

Among the great number of letters written in early Christian times, the letters of St. Paul had the most significant role and the greatest influence on the development of the Church, but their evaluation and interpretation differed from time to time throughout these early centuries. We learned about the reception of Pauline letters in the first and second centuries from Professor Manabu Tsuji’s opening lecture at the APECSS Conference in Sendai, 2009.¹ We know that Pauline letters were included into the Canon of the New Testament and read within Church communities; it can also be detected that Marcion, the Gnostics, and the Manicheans used Pauline letters in order to support their dualistic perspective.² In this developing period of the assessment of Paul, Origen of Alexandria had a decisive role in the first half of the third century, exercising a strong influence on Athanasius of Alexandria in the early fourth century and on the establishment of the Canon of the New Testament.³

Here I would like to turn to the Latin West and to consider a remarkable fact, that the commentaries on the Pauline letters were produced one after another in the late fourth and early fifth century: Marius Victorinus, Ambrosiaster, Jerome, Tyconius as well as Rufinus’ translation of Origen’s Commentaries on Romans were produced in this period. Peter Brown impressively pointed out that “the last decades of the fourth century in the Latin Church, could be well called the ‘generation of St. Paul.’”⁴ Augustine of Hippo (354–430) was among the authors following the same trend. When Augustine was still a young

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¹ See Manabu Tsuji, Beyond the Original Context: Reception of Pauline Letters in the First Century, in this volume.

² Cf. W. S. Babcock, Paul and the Legacies of Paul (Dallas, TX, 1990) xx.

³ This point is clarified by Miyako Demura in her paper: M. Demura, Reception of Pauline Letters and the Formation of the Canonical Principle in Origen of Alexandria, in this volume.

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presbyter (391–395) and newly ordained bishop (395/6–) in the 390s, he wrote at least five works intensively dealing with the Pauline letters, and focused especially on the Epistle to the Romans and the Epistle to the Galatians:

1) Questions 66–74, and 82 from On Eighty-three Questions (De diversis quaestionibus octoginta tribus) in 391–395,
2) Commentary on Romans (Expositio quarundam prepositionum ex epistola ad Romanos) in 393–394,
3) Commentary on Galatians (Expositio epistolae ad Galatas) in 394,
4) Unfinished Commentary on Romans (Epistolae ad Romanos inchoate exposition) in 394–345, and
5) Response to Simplician (Ad Simplicianum de diversis quaestionibus) in 396.

The Commentary on Galatians and the unfinished Commentary on Romans are the commentaries intending to explain the whole text, while the other three commentaries pick out some passages which Augustine considered to be significant and difficult to understand, and tried to clarify their meaning. In the case of the first book of Ad Simplicianum, Augustine especially focused on Rom. 7:7–25 (the first question) and Rom. 9:10–29 (the second question). He says in the preface:

But still I am not satisfied with my previous research and explanation, since I may have negligently overlooked something pertinent, and I have gone through the Apostle’s words and the sense of his statement more carefully and attentively. For, if it were a quick and easy matter to understand them, you would not consider that they should be investigated.5

The method of raising some questions on a particular passage and proposing the answer to that question is something like a discussion or dialogue in going over the text. Augustine used this method in replying to inquiries that he was asked by his fellow clergy and elder bishops like Simplician through the form of letters. He must have intended to involve the addressee(s) into this dialogue with St. Paul and the Scriptures in general. For example, in the first reply in Ad Simplicianum, Augustine commented on Rom. 7:24–25, “Wretched

man that I am! Who will liberate me from the body of my death? The grace of God through Jesus Christ our Lord.” Augustine explains, “in this text, it seems to me that the Apostle has put himself in the place of someone who is under the law, whose words he speaks in his own person.” Augustine understands this passage as relating to anyone who is under the Law. And through this, he makes the relationship between Paul and the people very intimate, trying to urge the people to decide whether they themselves are under the Law. Here he uses the Pauline framework of law and grace, not to demonstrate a general theological theory but to clarify a human condition he and his congregations have to struggle with and manage to achieve. This passage presents a characteristic method of Augustine’s commentaries on the Pauline Letters.

In the chapter “Lost Future” in Augustine of Hippo: A Biography, Peter Brown emphasised that “for the first time, Augustine came to see man as wholly dependent on God.” According to Brown’s view, in the past Augustine had interpreted Paul as a Platonist, seeing Paul as the exponent of spiritual ascent, but now, in the 390s, Augustine saw in Paul nothing but a single, unsolved tension between “flesh” and “spirit,” and exposed a realization of states of awareness in this tension. Augustine expresses this tension as a development of the four stages of the human condition: the first stage is ignorance of its existence “before the Law (ante legem),” the second stage is helpless realization of the extent of the tension between good and evil “under the Law (sub lege),” the third stage is a stage of utter dependence on a Liberator “under Grace (sub gratia),” and the fourth stage comes only after this tension in life is resolved “in peace (in pace).” In the beginning of Ad Simplicianum Augustine presupposes these famous four stages or phases in a single man, which was firstly pointed out in Commentary on Romans. Brown emphasises that this understanding and awareness of human condition came to Augustine’s mind never before the 390s.

In his earlier Commentaries on the Pauline letters, Augustine had still entertained the idea of some merit of faith on the human side;
however, he changed his mind in *Ad Simplicianum* so that he just became aware of the absolute primacy of God’s grace. In view of such a clear-cut division between divine grace and human sinful incompleteness, Paula Fredriksen emphasises the novelty of *Ad Simplicianum.*10 Van Fleteren argues that Augustine’s theology of Grace was fully expressed in the Pelagian Controversy of the fifth century, but its essence was formed in these early Commentaries on the Pauline Letters and especially in *Ad Simplicianum.*11 In contrast, Carol Harrison in her new book turns our attention to many pieces of evidence that Augustine believed in the absolute primacy of divine grace in his early days of conversion, ten years before he wrote the *Ad Simplicianum.*12 Carol Harrison argues that “*ad Simplicianum* therefore represents less a revolution in his thought as its natural evolution in the light of Pauline theology.”13

In this paper, taking into consideration the recent research on Augustine’s exegesis of the Pauline letters, I would like to examine the context of his intensive commentaries on the Pauline letters as a young clergyman and a monk in 390s and argue that his development of the understanding of the human condition should be understood not through a narrow focus on the theology of divine Grace and human merit, but in a wider view of the mutual intimate relationship between God and human beings, that was needed for Augustine in his new position of a pastor and a preacher.

In his introduction to a new translation of Augustine’s *Commentary on Galatians* written towards the end of Augustine’s priesthood (394–395), Eric Plumer emphasises that “Augustine’s purpose in commenting on Galatians was very different from Jerome’s and cannot be adequately understood apart from the context of Augustine’s priestly


(13) Ibid., 151.
and monastic life.” His suggestion casts new light on Augustine’s reception of the Pauline letters. He pointed out a close similarity of the usage of language between the Commentary on Galatians and the Monastic Rules, and argued that both Paul and Augustine had a keen interest in fraternal correction within a community life. The pastoral intention of his interpretation of Rom. 7 and 9 in Ad Simplicianum was also pointed out by T. G. Ring. Plumer emphasises the connection between Paul’s theology and his ethics. Plumer’s suggestion forces us to take into consideration the demands of Augustine’s readers and gives us a clue to understanding Augustine’s intention when he answers in a certain way to such and such colleagues.

It is true that in the 390s Augustine held the concept of the four stages of the human condition. ante legem, sub lege, sub gratia, and in pace. And in Ad Simpliciaum, he accepts that “all die in Adam (1 Cor 15:22)” and says, “all human beings — from whom origin of the offence against God spread through the whole human race — are a kind of single mass of sin owing a debt of punishment to the divine and loftier justice.” This passage sounds like a very dark form of pessimism and a determinist interpretation of the human condition. However, Augustine continues, commenting on Rom. 9:20–21, “…Or does the potter not indeed have the power to make from the same lump of clay one vessel for honour and another for reproach,” and says:

…with those very words he seems to show with sufficient clarity that he is speaking to fleshly man, because the mire itself alludes to that from which the first man was formed... He [the Apostle. — K. D.] says that there is a single lump for all. And although one vessel is made for honour and another for reproach, nonetheless even the one that is made for honour has to begin in fleshly fashion and from there rise up to spiritual maturity, since they had already been made for honour and already been reborn in Christ.


(16) Ad Simplicianum 1, 2. 17 (CCSL, 44) 43–44; English translation is in Canning and Ramsey, Responses..., 199.

(17) Ibid.
We should not forget that in the *De Doctorina Christiana*, written in the same period or even a little later in 396–397, Augustine did not give up his earlier framework of the seven grades of spiritual ascent (2, 7. 9–11) that were mentioned in *On the Sermons of the Lord on the Mountain* (*De sermone Domini in monte*) in 393. These grades are: 1) timor Dei, 2) pietas, 3) scientia, 4) fortitudo, 5) consilium, 6) intellectus, and 7) sapientia. Augustine requires humility as the beginning of the spiritual ascent. He combines the first grade from Isaiah 11:2 and the Lord's first beatitude in Matthew 5:3, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” In both cases, the climax of ascent is wisdom (*sapientia*). Thus we can safely say that even in *Ad Simplicianum* the possibility of the ascent towards wisdom still remains as long as one has started his ascent from the humble fear of God. In doing so, Augustine criticises the lack of humility and self-satisfaction of wise men of this world. Their will is diverted from God to worldly matters by the habit of flesh.

Here we have to pay attention to Augustine's basic notion of Christian philosophy. *Philosophia* for him means the love of wisdom (*amor sapientiae*). For Augustine, a true philosopher is a true lover of true wisdom (*sapientia=sophia*). And the true wisdom is certainly Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Referring to Paul, Augustine's understanding of the Incarnation of the Son is nothing but the incarnation of “Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor 1:24), whether or not Paul himself understood the incarnation as the Incarnation of Wisdom. So for Augustine it is indispensable that the goal of human life is to have an intimate relationship with wisdom even if our life is totally filled with sin. Since Augustine accepts Rom. 5:5 “the Love of God has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us,”¹⁸ as the basis of his investigation and consistently interprets this Love of God as loving God by human beings which is enabled through the gift of the Holy Spirit. If so, the love of wisdom (*philosophia*), that is, the love of Christ Incarnated, is offered to all human beings by God himself. In this context, we cannot separate philosophy as a loving search for wisdom from the so-called “theology of Grace” in Augustine.

It is remarkable that throughout Augustine’s early *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 1–32, written in 392 at almost the same period as his Pauline commentaries, every time that he mentions Christ Incarnate, he adds to Christ the title of the Wisdom of God (*Sapientia Dei*). For example, when he makes a figurative interpretation of a tree planted alongside running waters in Psalm 1, he says, “This may refer to Wisdom itself, who deigned to assume humanity for our salvation...” (1, 3). Augustine thus comments on Psalm 8, verses 6–7, “the ‘son of man’ is visited in the first instance in the person of the Lord-Man himself, born of the Virgin Mary. On account of his fleshly weakness, which the wisdom of God condescended to bear, and on account of the humility of his suffering, scripture rightly says of him....” Augustine says thus in his commentary on Psalm 9: 16: “Then there follows, I will rejoice over your salvation, that is to say, in happiness shall I be held by your salvation, which is our Lord Jesus Christ, God’s power and wisdom.”

Another interesting point is that Augustine’s soteriology is combined with ecclesiology throughout his interpretation of the Psalms and the Gospel. He has a keen interest in the methodology of Scriptural exegesis. Augustine thinks that the Psalms represent their message in six voices: *vox ad Christum, vox de Christo, vox de ecclesia, vox Christi, vox ecclesiae, and vox totius Christi.*

This means that according to Augustine’s exegetical method every word and phrase in the Psalms should be read in the light of Christ Incarnate and this Christ is dwelling in the Church as the Body of Christ. It is certain that the Psalms in the Old Testament were accepted from the viewpoint of the coming of Jesus Christ in the New Testament according to the typological exegesis in Early Christianity. But in addition to this we may find here a characteristic tendency of Augustine’s exegesis. He strongly relies on Pauline theology when he interprets


(21) *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, 9, 15 (CSSL, 38) 54, English translation is in Boulding and Rotelle, *Expositions...*, vol. 1, 149.

the Scriptures. Jesus Christ of the Gospels in this context is interpreted from the viewpoint of specific passages of the Pauline letters, namely, 1 Cor. 1:24, “Christ is the power of God and Wisdom of God” and 1 Cor. 12:12, “All the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ,” as well as 1 Cor. 12:27, “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.” I think that these passages are the keys on how to read the Scriptures for Augustine.

If so, how did he read the Pauline letters? As I pointed out above, he raises some questions on a particular passage and proposes his answer to that question which is something like a discussion or dialogue through the text. In doing so, he focuses on the life activities of St. Paul. Thus, it must have been important for Augustine to comment on the passage of Rom. 7 referring to the condition of Paul closely connected with the general condition of human beings. Pauline letters are the very testimonies of the work of divine grace that made it possible for Paul to go over from life under the law to life under grace.

For Augustine in this period Paul is the ideal preacher (praedicator). And Augustine sincerely accepts his preaching job as the essential ministry (ministerium) of a Christian bishop at the latest in 396/7 (as the conjunct Bishop since 395, and exceptionally in the Latin tradition he, still a presbyter, was engaged in preaching on behalf of Bishop Valerius since 391). This pastoral experience is the basis of his Pauline expositions and the results of these considerations are fruitfully elaborated in his masterpiece the Confessions (397–401).

He concludes the beginning paragraph of Confessions Book 1, in the following way, “May faith call upon you, Lord, this faith which is your gift to me, which you have breathed into me through the humanity

(23) Ad Simplicianum 1, 1. 1 (CCSL, 44) 8. Later in his Retractiones 2, 2 (426), he criticises his own earlier position that “I explained those words of the Apostle — The law is spiritual, but I am fleshly (Rom. 7:14) and so forth by which the flesh is shown to struggle with the spirit — in such a way as to see humankind described as being still under the law and not yet under grace (Rom. 6:14). For it was not until long afterwards that I realized that those words can as well — and this is more likely — pertain to the spiritual person” (Canning and Ramsey, Responses..., 169). This may suggest that in the 390s Augustine maintained the universal sinfulness of human beings not so strongly and that his understanding of divine grace has some continuity throughout his Pauline expositions, not so clear-cut as in Ad Simplicianum. This may support Carol Harrison’s position. The date of his later change of his mind is discussed in Van Fleteren, Augustine’s Evolving Exegesis, 89–114, esp. 95–113.
of your Son and the ministry of your preacher.”

Scholars think that the preacher mentioned by Augustine, was probably St. Paul. It is very characteristic here that a combination of the Son Incarnate and the ministry of a preacher can be found here. Both are functioning as tools of divine grace to make Augustine’s faith realized. We must understand that grace was not only effective in his conversion ten years before but also even more effective in his office of Bishop in 397. Here Paul and Augustine are assimilated within his understanding of a preacher’s mission.

If this is the case, we can say that the narrative on Augustine’s life before his baptism, from 354–387, in Confessions I–IX, and the reflection on his life as a bishop in 397 in Confessions X, correspond to the life sub lege and the life sub gratia. And throughout this tension, we can discern that the requirement of humility and love toward the wisdom of God is the key momentum in the Christian life.

In conclusion, I would like to propose a rather simple claim. We need to read Augustine’s Pauline Commentaries not by drawing a narrowly focused theological interpretation of the concept of divine grace and human sinfulness, but trying to understand the commentaries from the perspective of Augustine’s community life as well as the situation in his congregations and among his fellow monks. In doing so, we can understand Augustine’s criticism of boastful self-satisfaction and claim to possess intellectual, moral, and religious fullness like the Manichaean elected, the Platonist intellectuals, the Donatist sectarians, and the Pelagian groups. This is the basis, on the other hand, for his merciful acceptance of humble converts into his Church. It is just like Paul that Augustine himself was and is accepted by divine mercy into his position in this world.


(25) For example, Paul is said to be “transformed ... to its still more famous preacher (mirabilior praedicator effectus est)” in Ad Simplicianum 1, 2, 22 (CCSL, 44) 23, Canning and Ramsey, Responses..., 207. See J. J. O’Donnell, Augustine Confessions II Commentary on Book 1–7 (Oxford, 1992) 17.
SUMMARY

Taking into consideration the recent research on Augustine’s exegesis of the Pauline letters, this article examines the context of his intensive commentaries on the Pauline letters as a young clergyman and a monk in 390s. The author argues that Augustine’s development of understanding the human condition should be viewed not through a narrow focus on the theology of divine Grace and human merit, but in a wider view of mutual intimate relationship between God and human beings, that was needed for Augustine in his new position of a pastor and a preacher. It is concluded that Paul the preacher is the key figure for Augustine in interpreting the Scriptures.